

THE CRITIC AS ARTIST

37

through which they walked, had a kind of
poetical quality of
its own, and almost without changing could pass
into song.
The snow lies thick now upon Olympus, and its
steep sides are bleak and barren, but once, we fancy,
the white feet
of the Muses brushed the dew from the anemones
in the morning,
and at evening came Apollo to sing to the
shepherds in the vale.
But in this we are merely lending to other ages
what we desire,
or think we desire, for our own. Our historical
sense is at fault.
Every century that produces poetry is, so far, an
artificial
century, and the work that seems to us to be the
most natural
and simple product of its time is always the result
of the most
self-conscious effort. Believe me, Ernest, there
is no fine
art without self-consciousness, and self-
consciousness and the
critical spirit are one.

Ernest. I see what you mean, and there is
much in it. But
surely you would admit that the great poems of the
early world,
the primitive, anonymous collective poems, were
the result of
the imagination of races, rather than of the
imagination of
individuals?

Gilbert. Not when they became poetry. Not
when they
received a beautiful form. For there is no art
where there is
no style, and no style where there is no unity,
and unity is
the individual. No doubt Homer had old ballads
and stories
to deal with, as Shakespeare had chronicles and
plays and
novels from which to work, but they were merely
his rough
material. He took them, and shaped them into
song. They
became his, because he made them lovely. They
were built
out of music,

**And so not built at all,
And therefore built for ever.**

The longer one studies life and literature, the
more strongly one
feels that behind everything that is wonderful
stands the
individual, and that it is not the moment that
makes the man,
but the man who creates the age. Indeed, I am
inclined to think
that each myth and legend that seems to us to
spring out of
the wonder, or terror, or fancy of tribe and
nation, was in its
origin the invention of one single mind. The
curiously limited
number of the myths seems to me to point to this
conclusion.
But we must not go off into questions of
comparative myth-
ology. We must keep to criticism. And what I want
to point out
is this. An age that has no criticism is either an
age in which
art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the
reproduction